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Post-tsunami transitional settlement and shelter: field experience from Aceh and Sri Lanka

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In 1978, Ian Davis wrote that 'shelter must be considered as a process, not as an object'.¹ Especially in a post-disaster context, shelter must be viewed as a series of actions fulfilling certain needs, rather than simply as objects such as tents or buildings. Those needs can be summarised as: (i) health, including protection from the elements; (ii) privacy and dignity for families and for the community; (iii) physical and psychological security; and (iv) livelihood support. Beneficiaries often take action to meet these needs by altering the post-disaster shelter provided during relief operations. As a result, self-help should be factored into any shelter process, including providing support to beneficiaries for their alterations.²

Minimum standards and field guidelines have been published to support field operations in policy and programme development, decision-making and implementation for the post-disaster shelter process.³ These guide-

lines term post-disaster shelter 'transitional shelter', and factor in wider community aspects through 'transitional settlement'. Using the word 'transitional' to describe settlement and shelter emphasises that, in a post-disaster context, this is a process of transition from temporary to permanent. Addressing settlement and community issues throughout these processes is as important as providing physical structures and addressing individuals' needs.

This article reports on field work in Sri Lanka and Aceh on transitional settlement and shelter in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004. Policy and practice points are described in order to place the post-tsunami settlement and shelter processes within wider settlement- and shelter-related development issues. Three main points emerge from our experiences.

Settlement and shelter processes

The first point is that there are clear advantages in approaching settlement and shelter as processes involving the people who will use them, rather than as objects or products to be built, turned over to the recipients and left behind. Thirty years after Ian Davis originally espoused this notion, it is rarely implemented in the field. Instead, transitional settlement and shelter is often considered to be part of non-food item distribution, rather

1 I. Davis, *Shelter After Disaster* (Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1978).

2 J. Ashmore et al., 'Diversity and Adaptation of Shelters in Transitional Settlements for IDPs in Afghanistan', *Disasters*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2003, pp. 273–87.

3 *Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* (Geneva: Sphere Project, 2004); T. Corsellis and A. Vitale, *Guidelines for the Transitional Settlement of Displaced Populations* (Oxford: Oxfam, 2005).

than as an ongoing exercise in supporting livelihoods, health and security needs. Rather than a lesson learned and accepted, it is still one to be relearned and implemented.

This is particularly important where reconstruction involves improvements to traditional building methods. For instance, the use of beneficiary labour in Aceh provided hands-on opportunities for training in seismic resistance (Box 1). As noted in Box 1, however, community participation should not necessarily imply community control. Unrealistic expectations arose during community consultations in Sri Lanka and Aceh. For example, Western-style concrete structures might be requested because they represent 'development' and 'progress', even though they are less suited to the climate and to other environmental hazards in the area.

In Sri Lanka, the government's policy tended to support household involvement in managing construction. This strategy recognised that active participation in reconstructing one's own home and community not only contributes to the best possible results, but also provides a psychological boost to post-disaster mental health recovery (see Box 2, p.30). Providing secure shelters also helped to support livelihoods, for example by providing a place for storing tools and materials, while land security assisted in securing cash grants or bank loans for construction and for restarting livelihoods.

there are clear advantages in approaching settlement and shelter as processes involving the people who will use them

Compensation grants from international organisations and NGOs further assisted by facilitating early permanent reconstruction, but the administration method failed to ensure sound technical advice for safer rebuilding. The compensation was handed out by offices of the local civil service in tranches, with the condition that delivery of the next tranche depended on the district technical officer approving the construction so far. Approval was slow because there was only one technical officer per district, who had a caseload of thousands of houses and could not realistically monitor and control all construction at each stage in a timely manner. These officers' technical knowledge, for instance for cyclone-resistant housing, was sometimes limited, and the organisations providing the funds for compensation did not appear to demand or expect significant technical training.



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Workers prepare frames for transitional housing in Indonesia

Box 1: Labour and training issues in Aceh

Many organisations in Aceh used beneficiary labour and trained communities in seismic-resistant construction techniques. Organisations tried to promote timber construction due to its comparatively good performance in earthquakes. Housing committees were formed, and communities were encouraged to choose their own skilled labourers and to manage the construction process themselves. However, the speed of construction under an unskilled workforce learning new construction methods was slow. A mixture of pressure to act and the inexperience of Indonesia's government and supporting organisations meant that projected completion dates for permanent housing were highly optimistic, causing widespread discontent with progress.

As more organisations turned to contractors for labour, it became more difficult to encourage beneficiaries to build their own houses. Success was increasingly measured by the number of houses built, so that the focus on safety and livelihoods was largely lost. There was also pressure to build 'modern' masonry houses, despite the material's comparatively poor seismic performance, but timber scarcity was an issue too.

This approach to community participation for reconstruction had sound ideas and principles, but these did not always translate into improved reconstruction outcomes. The on-the-ground challenges of implementation, especially monitoring, were probably not fully considered due to the need to start the reconstruction process quickly.

Another significant challenge in Sri Lanka was implementing transitional settlement and shelter without considering the connection to permanent housing and communities. The question 'transition to what?' was

Box 2: Shelter and settlement as processes in Sri Lanka

South-west Sri Lanka was a case study for some good practice regarding settlement and shelter as processes. Initially, the Sri Lankan government intended to move people into camp-type settlements with government-built barracks. After seeing the first drafts of the country's post-tsunami transitional settlement and shelter strategy written by international organisations, the government ensured that many beneficiaries stayed on or near their original plots, and provided private, secure shelters and land security at an early stage. The initial buffer zone of 100 metres was smaller than the 200 metres applied in the north-east, so that a smaller percentage of the tsunami-affected population were threatened by permanent displacement. After March 2005, some reconstruction inside the buffer zone began to take place.

frequently forgotten. Partly, this was because organisations with limited settlement and shelter experience became involved in the sector due to the availability of funds, and government policies were ad hoc. Poor-quality settlement and shelter tended to result.

Non-tsunami concerns

The second point is that transitional settlement and shelter should deal, not only with tsunami-affected people, but also with the wider population. In our case studies, this happened infrequently. In Aceh, lack of support for conflict-affected people became a contributing factor to security problems for some NGOs.

In Sri Lanka, beneficiaries were selected on the basis of being verifiably tsunami-affected, so conflict-affected people were left out. This situation might not have been necessary given the resources available; in Trincomalee, for example, over 20,000 transitional shelter units were initially pledged by relief organisations, yet only about 7,000 were required for the tsunami-affected population. The focus on the tsunami also distracted from other non-conflict hazards. Earthquakes pose a significant threat in Aceh, yet many organisations working on settlement and shelter neglected seismic risk to focus on tsunami risk.

in Sri Lanka, the question 'transition to what?' was frequently forgotten

The standard of settlement and shelter for people unaffected by the disaster and for host communities should also be considered.⁴ While resource constraints or donor procedures might preclude it in practice, a disaster could be used as an opportunity to enact development reforms

⁴ Guidance on these matters is found in the Sphere Standards and the *Guidelines for the Transitional Settlement of Displaced Populations*.

in unaffected areas too. A few such programmes were seen, but not before resentment had built among some unaffected neighbours over the higher standard of shelter that tsunami-affected people had received. Additionally, in some cases, people without previous land rights, for instance renters and squatters, were given much less support than those who had owned their land and houses.⁵

Root causes of vulnerability

The third main point from our work is that transitional settlement and shelter should address root causes of vulnerability and the long-term processes and conditions which led to those vulnerabilities. Settlement and shelter issues in Sri Lanka and Aceh did not suddenly spring up on 26 December 2004, and they cannot be resolved simply through post-tsunami or even exclusively post-conflict reconstruction.

For decades, urban development in Sri Lanka and Aceh involved poor planning and inadequate attention to sustainable livelihoods, contributing to rapid population increases in coastal areas vulnerable to tsunamis. After the tsunami, many organisations did not conduct or use environmental impact assessments and did not consider long-term urban and regional planning in their settlement and shelter programmes, suggesting that the vulnerabilities exposed by the tsunami could be perpetuated.

often, post-disaster settlement and shelter processes address only disaster-related change, and do not consider pre-existing vulnerabilities

Many new settlements were built without considering other settlement options, and site selection and land allocation often proved inadequate. In Aceh Besar, one organisation constructed open stormwater drainage up against the front doors of houses built by another organisation, threatening the stability of both. Staff from each organisation blamed the other, highlighting the difficulties inter-agency competition can create. While in both locations conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction cannot be divorced from post-tsunami reconstruction, the focus tended to be on the settlement and shelter needs emerging only from the tsunami.

To avoid recreating tsunami vulnerability, exclusion zones for coastal redevelopment were mandated in Sri Lanka and, to a lesser extent, in Aceh. These were subject to inconsistent and arbitrary changes, which meant that many new transitional settlements were built without

⁵ Further details are provided in an Oxfam Briefing Note, *The Tsunami Two Years On: Land Rights in Aceh* (Oxford: Oxfam, 30 November 2006).

clear plans for permanent settlement and shelter since the coastal land available for permanent settlement was not known.

Moreover, while exclusion zones generally reduce the risks from future tsunamis and other coastal floods, failing to conduct proper assessments in new sites could increase exposure to other hazards. This approach also damages livelihoods that depend on living by the sea. In some cases, there were accusations that exclusion zones were imposed so that the coastal land could be used for other purposes, such as building hotels.⁶

Beyond the tsunami

The lessons from our Aceh and Sri Lanka experiences can be applied in other settlement and shelter contexts, both transitional and non-transitional:

- Community participation in decision-making for settlement and shelter should involve representative ages, genders and ethnicities, drawn from the people who will live in the settlement and from others who will be affected. Community participation should be used to exchange accurate and realistic information, including on the resources available and the timeframe required to provide transitional and permanent settlement and shelter.
- Environmental considerations should inform the design and construction of settlements and shelters, to minimise long-term impacts on ecosystems and environmentally based livelihoods. This approach also reduces disaster risk.⁷
- Coordination, not competition or confrontation, is necessary among organisations to ensure even coverage of beneficiaries, uniformity in the packages provided and consistency in meeting local and national building codes, as well as international standards.

the answer to the ‘transition to what?’ question is: ‘transition to a less vulnerable state than before’

- Post-disaster programmes should include measures to enhance the capacity of local partners to leave behind a development legacy. This also reduces disaster risk by enabling beneficiaries to understand the vulnerabilities which led to the disaster, and how to avoid rebuilding these or other vulnerabilities. In other words,

6 ActionAid, *Tsunami Response: A Human Rights Assessment* (Johannesburg: ActionAid, 2006).

7 For a discussion of the livelihood and disaster risk reduction advantages of integrating ecosystem management into development planning, see K. Sudmeier-Rieux et al., *Ecosystems, Livelihoods and Disasters: An Integrated Approach to Disaster Risk Management* (Gland/Cambridge: IUCN, 2006).

- The ‘transition to what?’ question also entails better understanding of pre-existing vulnerabilities in the planning and implementation of transitional settlement and shelter.
- Settlement and shelter interventions should support sustainable livelihoods.
- Policy and advocacy to deal with issues of land rights, including tenure and security, are necessary for the success of transitional settlement and shelter programmes.
- Connecting transitional settlement and shelter with permanent housing requires trained and experienced staff. This investment will yield rapid returns.

disasters, even those involving a sudden-onset hazard, inevitably have multiple root causes, including poverty and conflict, which increase vulnerability to the hazard

The reasons for this are principally funding, capacity issues for organisations and mandates, especially when organisations are officially invited by a host government to do post-disaster work. Yet disasters, even those involving a sudden-onset hazard, inevitably have multiple root causes, including poverty and conflict, which increase vulnerability to the hazard.⁸ If those root causes are not considered after the disaster, there is a danger that the same vulnerable state will be rebuilt, or that new vulnerabilities will be created. Planning and implementing transitional settlement and shelter within the wider context of long-term development, planning and housing activities can markedly reduce vulnerabilities, and mitigate the impact of future disasters. Transitional settlement and shelter can assist in eliminating factors which cause disasters and necessitate relief operations.

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8 See the discussion in P. O’Keefe, K. Westgate and B. Wisner, ‘Taking the Naturalness out of Natural Disasters’, *Nature*, vol. 260, 1976, pp. 566–67; J. Lewis, *Development in Disaster-prone Places: Studies of Vulnerability* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999); and B. Wisner, P. Blaikie, T. Cannon, and I. Davis, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People’s Vulnerability and Disasters*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004).